

MAYBE SOMETHING HAPPENED

By

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An Incomplete Novel

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**Submitted to the University of Kansas Department of English
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Master of Fine Arts

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My Landlord Is Dead

Here come the cops.

They knock on my dead landlord's door. I come up in back of them, having been in the yard. From behind, the cops look alike: clumpy buttocks in tight cop pants, each one's right hand on his gun, their left hands (seemingly) in their respective pants, a broad, serious stoop to all four shoulders. Stupid haircuts; Walgreens cologne.

"He's dead," I say. They startle. *What if they shoot me?* "He's the one who's dead. I live upstairs. I'm the one who called."

"You kill him?" one of them asks, facing me now.

What if I joke about wanting a lawyer, or say, I'll kill *you*? Those might get me in trouble. A person isn't supposed to "go looking for" trouble; no one wants to "cruise for a bruise." I don't want any trouble, one is supposed to say, especially if one is an old, fragile shopkeeper who's faced with men in masks and leather who have just overturned one's flimsy display of corn chips. But I am not such a shopkeeper. Levie was the real reason I didn't make any jokes. She would always say my jokes before I said them.

The cops open the door—the landlord had never locked it—and begin to look around. An ambulance arrives; I stand still on the porch. Two paramedics bring a stretcher and some machinery up to the house.

"Who are you," one says. "Where is the body."

I don't know where the body is so I tell them I am the tenant of the deceased—I actually say it that way: "I am the tenant of the deceased. I live upstairs." Then I follow them inside.

They find the landlord on the toilet, slumped against a window. The first thing they do is flush. I swat at the smell of it all—it clings to my glasses so I take them off and rub them around

on my belly.

The paramedics pull the landlord's pants up, put him in a body bag. I leave the boring stench and move to the livingroom. The cops are just standing around. I want to say their belts are unbuckled and their shirts are loosened, their guts hanging prodigious amongst the rotting junk of the place. None of that's happening, but that is what it *feels* like. The heat. The polyester.

One cop steps into the kitchen, where he opens the fridge.

"What's the point in that?" asks the other, perhaps curious in training—a gumshoe.

"Hungry," says the first one. He eats a piece of cheese. I watch from the doorway.

"Looks like fresh venison, something gamey and lean," he says. It is venison, I know, but how fresh is it?

"Should we grill it?" I ask.

The cops turn to me. They look at each other. The second cop holds a small stool that I have seen in the landlord's shed out back. His hand sort of dwarfs the stool, and I can see that girth has some claim on him—it will catch him in old age. The stool hangs tenderly in his grip; if attacked, he might not even use it as a weapon; he appears as though, if attacked, he might do nothing at all.

The first cop scrapes some melting hair gel from his brow. "You have a grill?" he asks.

"The dead guy does."

They look at each other again. The one with the stool licks his lips several times quickly; his tongue lingers a bit at the same spot with each swipe: under the septum. He craves his own boogers.

"But does he have any *chips*?" asks the one with the hair slime, the hunger, the mouth meant for cheese.

“I don’t know,” I say.

“Dealbreaker.”

“Oh.” I have decided to grill the meat regardless but I try to act a bit deflated, feeling out my place with the cops. One might imagine my shoulders drooping, my burgeoning desire to just jerk one off in the bathroom.

“Just kidding,” he says. “I’m Officer Weeks.” I shake his sticky hand. Where is the sink? I want to look around for the sink, but what if they shoot me? *What if they shoot me?*

“Officer Blanks,” says the one with the stool, which he wiggles at his side as if to say, I’d shake, but this stool . . .

“Hi.”

“I’ll go get some chips maybe?” Officer Blanks brings the seat of the stool to his mouth and gnaws at it. I feel a sort of primal joy; I think of Blanks and I in a cauldron together. We are balding, freakish little men. *From the same stew.*

“Good idea, Blanks. Call for back up,” Weeks hoots. He wipes his brow with a brown paper sack—where’d he get that? “Cop joke,” he explains to me, his brow speckled with sack bits.

Blanks makes to leave.

“Clean getaway,” I say. I am making a certain sense of the situation. I am playing a role.

“Nice try,” says Weeks.

“Home school police academy,” I say.

“What,” says Weeks.

Blanks smiles. “Barbeque,” he says, and leaves the kitchen, stool and all.

The paramedics shuffle the landlord’s corpse to the front of the house. Officer Weeks and

I follow.

“Get the door,” Weeks says. *Oh Weeks*, I think, beginning to narrate the sitcom that this will surely become. “Hey, dude,” Weeks nudges with the back of his hand, “get the door.” Maybe his hand moves to his gun. Let’s say it does. Let’s say I’m pistol-whipped in my dead landlord’s apartment. That way, there will be more tension later on, when I become such good friends with Blanks. In my mind, Blanks and I are already sharing a soda; I pour half a can for each of us into two small glasses that my late grandmother left me. “The only ones she could wrap her hands around in her final years,” I tell Blanks, the specter of Weeks’s pistol-whipping right there the whole time in the welts on my face. Weeks himself would be lurking with some thick ski mask on, his eyeholes stark through the satin drapes he’s behind, thinking he’s hidden. Would we persevere, Blanks and I? Or, would it all end in bloodbath? When my face heals from Weeks’s gun snub, when I learn to accept that Levie’s not coming back, then what? Will I still care about Blanks?

On the porch now, I wonder how I will finally die, be rid of the wondering. I pat my pockets searching for my pipe. I hold the match too close to my face again, tiny blood boils and pops under my nose-skin.

Meanwhile, sweet Blanks, slave to his partner’s salt craving, he calls from the street: “Don’t shoot him, Weeks.”

“Please, Hammer, don’t hurt ‘em,” I say.

“Get that grill going,” says Weeks.

“Right on,” I aim to please. My face be my charcoal.

Levie Begins

So I'm grilling this meat, turning it too often so that it will never get done. I suspend it in wavy air from where it drops its meat juice back to hot rocks. This woman walks through the yard, the point of her heels hitting stones just right so she never sinks into the mud or grass.

"What's going on here," she croaks. I am forced with the decision of whether to make her, in my mind, either a frog or a heavy smoker: the choice of whether to believe in a magical world—one without jobs and apartments, say—or abide in a dull one.

"Not much." Just flipping this buck's ass over coals.

"No, I mean with all the cops. The cops," she teases her hair from her temples. "I guess there's just one car. But it's been here all day."

"The guy died. Did you know him?" I motioned toward the house.

"Aren't you the guy? I've seen you out here." She's grabbed the spare set of tongs, now snatches the meat from my set. This is fine; her smell snaps me up, and I float, pulled by scent ropes into a cave that seems perfectly made for my body.

"I live upstairs. I made nice with these guys when they came to see off the body." I nod toward the cops' shapes in the yard. Weeks is asleep in a nest of old wicker; the trees look like Florida as they bless his slick face. Blanks stands on the gravel driveway, sniffing at something; he's got my acoustic guitar slung over his gut, one hand on the neck, the other spread peacefully over the hole.

I shake my tongs at my side. Venison blood flips off, catching in my leg hairs.

"They look fucking goofy," the woman says. She's closed the grill, cracks open a large can of coconut water.

"They're ok. The tubby one's always picking things up. The shiny one's dreaming of

food.” I bend my long arm toward her. Does she notice my muscles I’ve worked so moderately for? Or does it remain an innocuous gesture? “What are you doing here?”

“Just wanted to see what was up. Neighborly stuff.”

“What’s the subtext, the hidden agenda?”

She juts out the middle of her. “Look, look at these hips. I know you like hips. A self-proclaimed ‘legs and ass man.’ That’s why I wore heels—”

“I don’t really like high hee—”

“That’s why I took them off.” She had.

“Who are you really?”

Blanks breaks the tension with a chordless blast on the guitar.

“I’m your next lover. I’m going to throw you into doorknobs, then dab at the bruises with my tongue.”

“That sounds like my type, alright.”

“I know. I know your type. Your type *talks* about your type, she discards her shoes at your whim, she will do what she needs to claw you. You don’t even know your whim until she acts to define it.” She’s trying to be Levie now.

“Hi, who’s your friend?” Blanks says, beside me now.

“She’s my type,” I say.

“I’ll be seeing you around,” she says, already walking away. “Your venison’s ready.”

I open the lid of the grill: three venison steaks garnished with parsley potatoes and peppers glisten from tin foil pouches. The salt is nearby.

“Wow,” says Weeks gobbling across the yard.

Blanks is already eating.

In Bruges

In the winter, Levie's skin would become ashen, and so in late summer, to hold me over, I would need to look frequently at how the sun had connected the freckles on her chest into a rusty canopy. In the alleys we would kiss and then I would use one finger to pull down her collar a bit. A good friend of mine had written that tugging at a lover in public could be interpreted as an act of possessiveness by the lover. I did not want Levie to feel this way.

“Oh, they are your freckles,” she said.

It could not have been the Flemish sun that connected her freckles: the summer visitor to Flanders should always be prepared for rain. We must have spent the summer in Georgia where the sun seemed to connect everything. Then, we went to Bruges, where gambling and drugs play a part.

Bruges, at that time, was flush with this stimulant they called Bread that was like cocaine but it wasn't cocaine. A bump of Bread faded quick—perhaps it was the humidity. I would wait just long enough between hits that my body would begin to despair that it would never have it again. In the meantime, I kept trying to train my brain: when my body lurched in lieu of the drug, I focused on the shittiest feeling or memory I could conjure. (Often, I recalled cheating on Levie, which I am not sure that I ever did.) Then, when I took another bump, the first bit of the high extended that euphoric sadness, made it feel so comprehensive.

The first night in Bruges I lost a lot of money in blackjack and had to ask Levie for some cash to buy in again. She handed me a thousand Euros without thinking about it and I won back all of my money. That's not much of a plot. No one ever threatened to kill me, or throw me in jail. I didn't miss a single meal over it. Samuel L. Jackson did not appear with a shiny pistol, nor Laurence Fishburne with rings on his hands to lacerate my face with. It was a rather short night,

really. As I walked back to our hotel I was grabbed by the arm and pulled into an alley. *This might hurt*, I thought.

But my fate was Levie's face in mine. (I am very good at dreaming. I can really make things up!) She had hot tea in a thermos and her hair fell like a dry snow from the sky of her head. We knelt and sipped the tea, rubbing each other's thighs. Just as the chill of the alley bricks started to sting my knees, Levie produced a checkered blanket from her bottomless satchel. It was checkered black and yellow and woolen.

We talked about our families. I didn't know what happened to anyone in my family in the last ten years. My family was like a shirt that I kept but never wore.

"I wear that shirt," Levie said. "I don't normally wear it but sometimes I do. I want to wear things that feel unfamiliar on my body because I think it makes me feel alert, more aware of my body. I have so much stuff in storage that I know I've forgotten about. What could I learn from making my body feel the things it would feel if I wore them again?"

My middle finger slipped into the handle of the thermos cap, catching a bit at the middle knuckle. I wanted to fit my fingers into Levie's vertebrae, pull her nerves gently out from her skin.

"Once I was wearing a pair of underwear," Levie went on, "that I was not used to the feel of—they were so light. I went to the bathroom in the dark. First, I realized that I had not pulled down my underwear." She laughed and bent forward over her knees. She was looking down and to her right. I tried to remember what that meant—if a person looks up they are trying to recall a lofty thought, down they want something tangible. "Then I realized that the toilet seat was still down. It was my last pair of underwear." She was really laughing now, her shoulders shrugging. "I don't think it was the first or only time I'd done any of that."

The story was funny, of course, but I could not laugh.

Still, I loved how deliberately she spoke, as if to dispel all the fun that she'd had in her life without me.

She could make her lips so thin; I wanted to cover her entire mouth with mine. I reached over and pressed my middle thumb knuckle into a dimple but I only left it for a second.

We had almost finished the tea. Some leaf scraps stuck in our teeth. Levie bared her teeth and waited. I waited. I closed my eyes and imagined my hands on the speckled skin of Levie's forearms. How do I imagine that now?

"What are you waiting for?" she asked.

"Your teeth to get cold," I said. "I want to lick your teeth when they are cold."

"Oh." They were like fresh porcelain tiles; I scrubbed at the grout with my tongue.

I had been on a Texas Hold 'Em bender in Ostend and was away from our place in Bruges for over two full days. I came back to find Levie slumped up against a couch with a bunch of Bread crumbs sprinkled between her breasts. She was nude. My first thought was to get some embalming materials, but I knelt down in front of her and sat back on my feet. I rubbed my feet together, rocked back and forth, dipped my face down into the Bread. *This will be my last time rolling, with Levie's breasts, in Bruges.* Again, the Bread beamed my sadness to space.

"Oh Levie," I sobbed. "Your soul is my only pillow."

That really cracked her up. I fell onto my back, rolling like a turtle with my limbs useless in the air. Realizing how stupid I could be made me very sad, but only for a moment. I got up and laid my head on her chest as it settled from laughing.

"Your heart beats calmly," I said, "smugly, and lightly."

“I’ve been doing yoga for hours, drinking chamomile. When I heard you in the hallway, I scattered some Bread across my chest and just let myself fall back.”

I stuck my tongue out towards the Bread but it wouldn’t reach. I sniffed very hard but didn’t get any. I didn’t want to move my head because the base of my ear nested perfectly in the crotch of her arm: it felt impossible to move now that I had a living Levie.

I had so many comforts in my life at that time. I kept winning at the tables. I kept staying in all of these beautiful cities. Levie had all these freckles to look at—there was a math to them. There was a math to poker that the Bread rendered simpler. The ringing of the casinos was a comfort, but the best was the smell of dead skin and dirt built up on the poker chips—to me the smell of hard work, the sweat of a monk.

Then Levie’s bosom was no longer under my face; then there was a mug of Yerba Maté. “You should probably drink this, and maybe some açai juice, too,” she said. “Or else I won’t want to have sex with you.”

We made love a long time and then I slept for a long time while Levie wrote. After that I stopped sniffing Bread and did not go back to the casinos in West Flanders.

I sat all day on park benches or church stoops, where I wrote in a notebook with pencils I sharpened by hand. At night we just looked at the rivers or lights and kissed in the cobbled alleys. It was so easy to live. Every beam in every building was the wood of the original construction—a century or more old—and it seemed that every beam was exposed. I felt wholesome. I drank goat milk in my coffee. Even the crack whores were angels; I gave the rest of my Bread to them covertly—*So god wouldn’t see*, I thought. It was fine they never thanked me, that they just sort of snatched it and ran. It seemed the whole world was wonderfully hungry.

This time in Bruges, what was it? It must have been the end of my life for a while, some spot I stuck a bookmark in and then walked away from. I had placed the bookmark carefully, so that I would know I had stopped in the middle of a page or paragraph, the middle of a sentence, even, at a spot without any punctuation, in the middle of a single-syllable word, in middle of the sound one letter would make. I placed the book on the bedside table, trying to make sure I did not disturb the bookmark.

In my socks, I got up. In my socks I ran through my living room, down the stairs, jumped off the porch and out into the street. *Remember the future*, I remember part of me thinking.

Then I had the very distinct feeling of being stuck inside an intensifying beam of light that covered over all my body, of being inside a loudening whirl of machines.

It must have been the sound of a car, my head in its wheel hub.

“Blanks’s Ass” Conceived

Here come the cops again.

I step into cat vomit and then I step on the cat’s foot. It makes no sound.

I match the rest of my steps across the apartment floor with the cops’ steps up the stairs. Just as they get to the top of the stairs I open the door. This is how I always move and open the door for the cops; they always startle, I think sometimes to please me.

I open the door to find that, this time, there’s just one of them: that sweetie pie, “Blanks!” Blanks jumps and hits his head.

“Cops should wear hats on their heads,” I tell him. “There’s a severe lack of decorative hats in the world.” I did not actually feel that way.

“No one wears hats because it’s a pain,” Blanks says rubbing his head.

“Because it’s the nineties,” I say. The phrase is, *Hey, it’s the nineties*, or whatever decade you are in at the time. It’s supposed to be funny so I laugh at myself without looking at Blanks. I look at a light switch; Blanks moves past me into the apartment.

“Mind if I look inside,” he says, after the fact. The phrase is, *Mind if I have a look around*, and with cops it’s supposed to forebode, but nothing’s going to happen. I might as well tell you right now that nothing happens with Blanks tonight.

I don’t tell Blanks what the real phrase is but I say, “Whatever you’re looking for, it’s not up my asshole.” The cops like it when I talk like that. They like me to think like a villain, so I wonder what would happen if I killed Blanks right now, or if he found a plan, all hashed out, hidden in the tank of my toilet. Of course, I don’t have a plan, but if I think bad things then there’s always the threat of real action. So, for Blanks’s sake, I think about smashing his face in. That’s what they really like: a dark hint of face-smashing floating around.

The cops come around looking for food and scripted catharsis. Sometimes they meet their girlfriends here in the midst of long shifts. They do most of the “meeting” in the spare bedroom. I do most of the cooking. If I know the girlfriends are coming, I cook vegetarian, or I make sushi. Tonight, when Blanks wants sushi without his girlfriend around, I feel like something will be different. But I’ve already told you that nothing will happen, and I’m sticking to it.

Blanks gets a cherry cola from the fridge, eats a pretzel, then steps in the cat vomit.

“I think your cat puked,” he says.

“Yes, that is probably what happened.”

“Gross,” he says.

Gross, the police officer says. A police officer.

The police turned real young in this town when the baby boomers retired or something like that. Let’s say lots of cops died in a massive suicidal shootout. Now, teen pregnancies abound. The town is severely depressed, a big fuzzy mob with crust in their beards, refusing to get out of bed or to pay more for nachos.

I’m sure that I’m older than most of the cops, so I try to look like someone younger than me who’s trying to look even older than I really am: greased up with hair goop, an extra shirt button open revealing hirsuteness, wearing some stupid medallion I stole from my cousin. I’d read a book with a character who’d tried looking something like that. Someone fell in love with him. They ate soup together, in the book, he and his lover. In this life, who will eat soup with me? Blanks will sometime soon—unavoidably—but tonight he wants sushi.

He pops another pretzel in his face, which he has not yet grown into. One day Blanks will be very fat and his mouth will sag so that it takes up most of his face. He will be like a creature with a mouth for a face and make moist snappy noises when he speaks.

“These are a little stale,” he says.

Does he need to feel that he’s powerful? I do not say anything, but I think, *They’ve been waiting so long for you, Blanks, where have you been?*

For effect in these instances I have begun to drink scotch. I tell the cops my great uncle—an alchemist—left me a bottomless bottle and they believe me in silence, always with their mouths full.

“What do you want in your rolls?” I ask Blanks. What do *I* want? I think back to my books. The books tell me that I have to want what I can’t have, even if it’s a glass of water. That’s what makes for a story—*desire*—so that’s how I’m making this story. I have to try to get what I desire, even if I end up a tragedy. I have to try to sell this image to Blanks, even through gimmicks. This all, from the books I’ve read; otherwise, I’d want nothing.

“Anything—but no tofu, I guess. None of that vegan stuff you make when the girls come.”

I’ll stuff you, I think, *full of shit!* I don’t think that with any true animosity. I don’t think anything with true animosity.

“Copper, Pig, ah, I eat pieces of shit like you for breakfast.”

Blanks puts his hand on my shoulder and chortles: he means the vegans no harm, the girls he loves them, I can see that. He likes that I cook for him, sure. But what is he *doing* here?

He is looking at my books again. “How many of these have you read?” he asks.

“How many had I read the last time?”

“Did I ask that last time?” Blanks puts a medical text back on a shelf of short story collections. I hum like I hum when I remember the dumb things I’ve done.

“You have asked that every time, I think.” I try to be tender. Part of his job is to

remember things, but here, in my apartment, I try to make the cops feel like they're not failing at everything. People keep dying in the town; the cops don't know what to do. There is always a new mess to clean up. But this is not about people dying.

I set several sushi rolls before him. "I think I have read three more since then," I say. "How is your girlfriend?"

"Ah fuck," says Blanks. "Ah christ. I don't even know if she's my girlfriend."

Blanks tries to bite his first bit of sushi but the fish is too thick and most of the rice falls off from under it. The fish he sucks into his mouth. He leans back, chews, and gets teary. Here is where I would hatch a plan were I ever going to hatch one. All these cops trust me. Blanks trusts me so much that he is about to cry right in front of me with his big, face-sized mouth full of fish, and I see his future—a mouth upon jowls.

Blanks swallows hard, starts telling me things. "I am a large man," he says. "There is only so much I can do. I mean, I knew this would happen."

I start to flip through a book—heartless, but erudite. A moth falls out of the book—it had been perfectly pressed in the pages. A little tinge of excitement ensues. I almost start to get an erection trying to remember the story behind the moth. Some field somewhere. A blonde, sort of athletic, nice calves, not unlike Blanks's girlfriend . . .

Shit. It is Blanks's girlfriend. I have never read this book, never shared it with anyone. I bought it used a week ago, the moth is someone else's memory.

Blanks, his gut scrunched at the edge of my table, continues to sob.

The cat licks the moth's wing and then starts to eat it. I think about licking the cat's vomit off of the floor. In this endless anomie, I invent a simple hope: that on my windowsill a small broken bird waits for me to cough the cat's vomit into its open beak. There is no science that can

help it like my love can.

Blanks settles enough to bite on his sushi again. The texture of sushi has had a soothing effect on me ever since I read that it soothed a character in a . No texture will ever sooth a man like Blanks; however, presently he seems to think some soy sauce might help, so he soaks the next bite in it. His mouth clicks. In his throat, the sushi meets the residue of his crying. Very softly, he chokes.

But then he scratches his ass through his cop pants. I close my eyes and listen to the scratching. If I can write a story wherein Blanks's ass is the hero, then I will be able to read that story, and then I will be able to want what Blanks's ass wants: to be scratched, to offer him relief. I will not want his girlfriend; I will not criticize his chomping. I can just be his ass—

Wherein Levie Appears on the Sidewalk

Blanks stayed very late at my place, not finishing his sushi. He ate all the pretzels, though. He kept tipping the bowl and looking inside. I would never have thought him capable of such arduous longing! Once or twice he dipped his finger into the crumbs, then flicked the crumbs back into the bowl. I dipped into the good scotch and got pretty drunk.

Sometime in the past I drank a lot of whiskey and got sick, I think. Naked in a tub, shitting white chalk that matched the porcelain, I had puked a lot. I thought it was the whiskey, but it was really hepatitis.

This morning I got this iced coffee and sat on a bench along a busy stretch of downtown street. I didn't know what was supposed to happen.

Looking at a parking meter, I was relieved to remember a short story about a parking meter that I had read in a literary journal. I should have gotten an ice cream cone like in the story—not this coffee. But there are more important things that the story demanded: firstly, to find a man who looks like a suicide bomber; then, to worry about him. Lastly, to out of there quickly, maybe saving a baby in the process.

People seemed to be walking funny, I noticed. Was this enough for them to look like terrorists? One man walks by with his weight back like he's pregnant, toes splayed out, a posture I find disgusting—so unaware of his body. *He is pregnant with sadness*, I joke to no one.

I find that I feel overwhelmed by my lack of knowledge about the man. People walk the ways they walk for reasons I cannot know. I try to give them stories, but they are so real; people are always walking within their own stories that I can't see—they are walking *back to* those stories. It was a kind of silent, horrific time travel, people always walking away from me while I could not see the forces that moved them. I felt something that could only have been the

gravitational pull of a million different lives that I could have been a part of but was not. I sat alone.

Then a woman sat next to me on the bench, which evoked a tingly feeling I recognized from books and movies. This woman, surely, was famous; we will fall in love.

“Why do you look like that?” she asked. Maybe she was foreign, too.

I laughed a little. I had spent a lot of time cultivating that laugh in fantasies, or I had heard it in my head when women seduced men in whatever book I was reading. In my fantasies, the laugh revealed that the woman had the upper hand: I would do anything to have her. I had never actually used this laugh before.

“I’m Levie,” she said to take the edge off.

“Why do I look like what?”

“Like, baffled by the world. Is it so hard to understand this street, the walking people, the concrete? You concentrate so hard.”

“Oh.”

“Each person walks by and you look at them as if they are the first human being you have ever seen.”

“I guess,” I said, “when they walk by they don’t seem like people, only parts of some bigger apparatus that I can’t see the whole of. They are just things moving in an invisible context, impulses in my brain, each on a neural path to a different emotion or series of emotions that could comprise whole new lives. It makes me sad. They are like tiny dents in my brain. When I think about dents in my brain, I feel sad.”

She did not look at me, which I took to mean she was listening. She watched people now, the lines that they walked.

“I cannot argue with dents in your brain.” I think it is safe to say that, at this point, we are in love.

“Are you going to get a drink?” I asked.

“From where?” she asked.

“Oh,” I said. “I thought I was still in front of the coffee shop.”

“We are on the beach,” she said.

Or, instead, we are at an open house in the suburbs. Levie is the only woman without a floral pattern. There are no hors d’oeuvres.

Or—*fine*—we are just on the street.

Then she looked at me very directly but very casually, peering over these tiny squarish glasses she wore. Briefly, I felt normal.

“I only stopped because I had this weird thought,” she said, folding a bit of her skirt into a tiny accordion. Her face, at least, could not have been real—it was like and organic cotton.

“What kind of thought did you have?” I noticed my coffee was gone. Why did I take notice of that then? I hated myself, who was never fully in any moment.

“That you were mourning people as they passed you by, and I did not want you to mourn my passing.” She leaned, and the world seemed French. I mean that rain fell from the sun, and wet stones smelled clean and heavy, orbiting all around her face. I don’t mean that fresh baguettes popped out from Dali museums and all of a sudden everyone got a free education—though that might as well have happened: that’s how it felt.

“How did your head get like that?” I asked.

“Like what?” She seemed to be falling asleep.

“In my head.”

Blanks's Ass

Hello, hi. I am an ass. I have given away the mystery.

Perhaps I should have made you induce that I am an ass, challenged myself to create a concrete depiction of my reality. There's not much to it though: I am an ass: two cheeks that hide a hole. I have more hair, I suppose, than some asses, but I do not believe that my hair threatens my recognizability as an ass. I would not hesitate, for instance, to say, "Hello, hi. I am an ass." If I were less obviously an ass I would be embarrassed to present myself as one, for asses, as a group, are mostly modest, though there are some among who give us a bad name. Am I one such? Not hardly; I should hope not. But I cannot be certain: I do not know what others think of me.

Of my own accord, I cannot so much as move, and so the fact that I am able to articulate my own existence here is somewhat befuddling to me. Yet, I am of no great intellectual ilk—we are hardly academics or philosophers—and so it is no real surprise to me that I am befuddled by my own articulation.

And what's more, how articulate have I really been here. It seems one who is truly articulate would be much more succinct than I have been, much quicker to convey just what I seek to convey.

These things, then: First, that I am an ass, which should be obvious from plain sight or now that I have rambled so. Second, that, if a bit verbose and overly sure of my assness, I am, like most asses, modest to the core—we are the gatekeepers of excrement, and I myself am the gatekeeper for a man whose excrement is, on the regular, quite embarrassing in both consistency and volume. I tell you this so that you might take heed when I reveal the third objective of my puny diatribe, so that you will not take it so

lightly. I want you to know that if I am troubling you (presumably a full-bodied human with a loyal ass of your own) with *my* concerns, that it must be a serious thing.

The third thing, finally, that I seek to tell you with all the earnestness and gravity that an ass can muster, is this: I itch greatly!

Ahh. Here is another example of my selfless existence. I have, just now, provided a simple, achievable desire for the man and he has been comforted in the sating thereof—he has satisfactorily scratched an itch.

Never have I desired anything for myself: it hurts me to be scratched thusly, but by the time the sensation reaches the man's brain it indicates mere relief to him. The simple, visceral respite that I regularly facilitate in his life allows him at least momentary distractions from his emotional turmoil; in the present case I have helped prevent him from gagging on some fish he was eating quite absent-mindedly. When he scratches me, he is not of the world; no worry can touch him. He is pure, focused pleasure.

Lo, I have provided this for the man to whom I am forever attached.

Blanks's Fist

Here they come, Blanks in the lead up the walkway as I watch half-nude from my bedroom window. In tow are the Bewford cousins (both cops) and Powers (her first name), who, on a regular basis, fucks elder Bewford in my spare room during his night shifts. Powers seems to have brought a tray of baked goods tonight; once, she brought potato salad. Life had felt meaningful that night as we rotated in and out of the bathroom.

I spend the better part of the night trying to teach Blanks how to smoke a pipe. He wants to be a private investigator, and since he is probably not insightful enough to ever be successful at it, I figure the pipe might console him in the future when he looks in the mirror, unsolved crimes slung like briefs over bedposts, unfound people drying like cold sores on his jowls. He does not know it yet, but I purchased the pipe as a gift for him. I have not told him about the waterproof notebook, pencil, and sharpening knife that I have also purchased for him.

Blanks, for his part, has taken to holding the pipe in a becoming manner: gently clasped in his folded hands, which rest across his belly as he slouches, his body at a forty-five degree angle to the table. *Just so*, is the phrase that comes to mind. Blanks has a way of taking all the qualities I would like to project onto him and making them better—a little like Daniel Day Lewis, but puffier.

“What’s this band that’s playing?” Blanks asks. Somehow, I have amassed a very large record collection.

“Wolfman Holiday,” I answer.

“Sounds rustic, but crisp,” Blanks nods. Perhaps he could blurb albums if he couldn’t be a P.I.

“Well I like it,” says Powers.

“I don’t think Blanks was *insulting* it,” says Cousin Bewford, the Younger.

“He made it sound brittle. To me it sounds like a nice warm cock running around the rim of a greased bowl. Just a sweet, warm hum.” She stands next to Elder Bewford, who grabs her waist and pulls her to him. His chin fits between her breasts as he looks up at her. Powers keeps looking at my medallion.

“You read that somewhere, didn’t you,” the Elder said. His fingers place intermittent pressure on the bit of extra skin above her hips. I’m guessing that Powers’s side fat, unlike Blanks’s, is seen as attractive—has made men say, *Now that’s a woman*; it was not the kind of fat that made a person look desperate and lonesome, or that of the prepubescent, or that of one who just cannot bring herself to exercise. It wants to be there, and she wants it there, too—and there it is.

I have just started to imagine myself wrapped in Powers’s fat, a buttery buffer from a great snow, when Elder Bewford addresses me: “You ever read that? You think she coulda read that somewhere?”

“What?”

“I didn’t read it,” Powers insists. “I just put my feelings into words, right here and now.” She looks me in the medallion, then in the eyes.

“You have such way with words,” says the Younger.

Elder Bewford stares at me, opens his mouth as if to ask me again, then closes his mouth. Blanks has begun to chew on the pipe; I should stop him.

I say, “I do not think I have read that anywhere, no. Blanks, the pipe will clog if you chew on it.”

“Oh,” says Blanks. His fingers, content with their own weight, wrap delicately around the

pipe.

“You ain’t read these books, then. I bet I can find it in one a these books.”

“I’ll write it in a book; then you can read it,” Powers says. I keep hearing a drawl in her voice that I am not sure is there. I think that maybe it is all the skin in the room that slows her words down, makes them back up on themselves just a bit. It occurs to me for what feels like the first time: humans are made mostly of skin. Skin is one big, continuous thing. One day we’ll all just be sagging around.

Powers is all skin. Even her tongue is skin, her eyelashes—I could see the crest of fat on the knuckle of her big toe, thick and short. I wanted to see how solid she was. I wanted to try to throw her and see how far I could get her to go. When nobody ate her potato salad last time, she did not seem to mind.

“It does sound sorta homemade,” says Blanks.

“They make their own amplifiers; they all majored in physics at Harvard,” I say to Blanks. “Let’s clean that pipe again.”

“Let me clean it,” Blanks says. “I want to learn, and I like the scooping part—that little spoon thing.”

Presently, I’m quite done up with scotch. Elder Bewford picks at his ear. Powers has a book at her bosom.

“How should I pack this thing again?” Blanks tries to shift.

“Blanks, your face will get cancer,” says Cousin Bewford the Younger. Then to me, “Why’re you teaching him to smoke that thing? He already puffs around like a dodo on crack as it is.”

Blanks wiggles and his seat creaks. His grimace suggests a wedgie, I recognize this. After a few seconds of wiggling, Blanks will excuse himself and go to the bathroom.

“You don’t inhale pipe smoke,” I say. “Not too hard on the lungs.”

“I’ve always wanted to smoke a pipe,” Blanks says. “It takes my edge off—I don’t want to intimidate people when I’m an investigator.”

“Studies have shown that pipe tobacco is one of the most soothing scents. Also, pumpkin spice.” I reach for a *Newsweek* that I know does not have the aforementioned “studies” documented within. As I suspected, the cousins wave me off. Instead, I fabricate a pumpkin pie begin to slice it. Powers presses the nozzle of the whipped cream can.

“Fucking studies never saved someone from cancer,” says the Younger.

“I like the smell of extra virgin olive oil cooking on the stove,” Blanks says.

“That’s because you’re extra virgin. And you’re fat,” says the Younger. “Studies have shown.”

The Younger is sober person, alert, up on current events, has not read a book since junior year of high school—when he fancied himself an “exceptional student”—but *remembers* what the books were about, what their themes were, whether or not he liked them, and he thinks himself a better person for this. He is clever, yes, but feels no need to be intellectually rigorous. And why bother? He is just 23, is getting laid on a regular basis with very little effort.

The Elder laughs. Powers exhales and touches the spines of four books at once, a finger apiece. Blanks raises a meaty paw and drops it with great acceleration into the crotch of Cousin Bewford the Younger.

“Cock!” yells the Younger.

Powers jumps. Elder Bewford’s right buttock comes off his chair. He puts the back of his

hand to his open mouth in mock amazement.

The Younger becomes fetal in the chair—a church-going fetus with shined shoes, pressed cuffs, and crushed nuts. “Ah god,” he says. “Ah Christ.” He looks at Blanks and I am surprised to see that the look lacks anger or even self-pity, but rather seems to accept the absurd complexity of human psychology. His look does not express forgiveness, but acknowledges the condescending aspects of forgiveness—*Who am I that my forgiveness means so much*, it seems to say.

Well, okay—it is just a look. The Younger lets it all go.

People ready themselves to leave this world in many ways, casting off possessions, calling lawyers, calling people they haven’t seen in years, saying prayers, taking vitamins. Pre-death vitamins have gotten big in this town—the kind that help your body puff up, push out the creases of your skin, make make-up last longer, prevent stench, etc.

People in my apartment ready themselves to leave—Younger Bewford a little hunchedly so. Someone expresses a desire for tacos. I begin to move about the apartment: straightening towels on wracks, sorting recycling, filing a few stray books. I move into my bedroom from where I mumble good-byes to the cops and Powers as I change my pillowcases, not looking up.

After they have left, I step into the kitchen and am startled to see Blanks, chins bunched under chin, looking out the window at the rest of the party getting into their cars. I feel a secret’s nigh.

Blanks says, “Can I take you to dinner?” The pipe steams nicely in his hands.

Going to Town with Levie

One day, Levie has to coax me to put on my pants.

“But it’s so hot,” I protest. I look at the sweat that has soaked through my undies. I twist as much as I can to look at my back, looking for a blackhead that always returns under my right shoulder blade. Levie always squeezes it for me and shows me what comes out.

“Yes, but you can’t go to town with your sweaty ass showing,” says Levie, tying her shoes. She ties them with two wand-like dowels—I don’t know how she does it.

“Then I don’t want to go to town,” I pout, nearly enacting what I imagine is British richness. “This is my aristocratic brat act,” I add. “Bring the town to *me*.”

Levie begins to squeeze my blackhead and by the time she presents the pus—at the sight of which feel like high-fiving—I realize that she has also succeeded in putting my pants on me. She zips me up with a smooch.

I am beginning to think that Levie drugs me sometimes, aren’t you? When am I writing this? Days later in a dungeon where Levie keeps me as I fade in and out of consciousness, of my memories? Could it be like the “brain in the vat” dilemma: If you are merely a brain in a vat, can you ever know that you are merely a brain in vat? You have no genuine sensory experience, just the simulation of such experiences that the vat allows you. Maybe the vat will allow you to suspect you are a brain in a vat only so that your suspicions are assuaged and that your efforts to liberate yourself will be confounded because of the comforting discovery that—aha!—if you were a brain in a vat, the vat would never allow you to think so.

Oh well, I may be drugged up in a dungeon, but some days the sun does shine and, see, my blackhead is freshly squeezed. In that my pants are on, I might as well go into town. I hope Levie allows me some time on a park bench to catch up on the sports rags.

How to Be More Social

Blanks has a hole in his throat that I know what to do with—I know to send that fucking throat to the hospital.

“Why the fuck did you come over here?” I ask Weeks. “Why not go to the emergency room?”

“Because we were fucking around and I think *I* shot him,” Weeks says.

Often, I imagine beating Weeks with his own belt, whipping the buckle into his cheeks and chin, goring the flesh above his cheekbones, making his neck puff with bruises, making a mask of his face. Once, I made him a tuna melt, and then another tuna melt to-go. I wrapped two Cokes in tin foil for him. I have stocked KitKat’s for him—I keep them in a drawer that he looks in, hoping to find drugs instead, or an unregistered weapon, or nuclear secrets, or the severed hand of a missing girl. But instead he finds the KitKats and always says the same thing: “Well, I’m just going to have to confiscate these instead.” He always laughs then. Though I have never liked Weeks, I have considered making him a KitKat shaped holster, and I have told him so. By the time of the tuna melts, Weeks had arrested me more than once, and he had hit me very solidly with his nightstick while I was least expecting it, at the back of my knee or perpendicular to my trapezius. So when I said to Weeks, regarding the KitKat holster, “Hang it over your dick and maybe you will finally get some,” he hit me in the crotch with his nightstick and began to cuff me. “Why not use this lasso?” I wondered aloud, offering up a batch of laundry line I had stolen from a garage sale. Then he nightsticked me in the trapezius, dragged me down the stairs, threw me in the squad, and drove off. “What about the tuna melt and Cokes,” I pleaded. I wanted to remind him of my kindness, but I think I appealed to his hunger. “Shit,” he yelled, and drove back to my apartment. He let me go. He had always let me go, of course.

Now, Weeks has shot Blanks. Blanks coughs in a way that makes it impossible to know where it comes from—his mouth or the hole in his throat.

“Let me see,” I say to Blanks. He lets his hand down. As I said, there is a hole in his throat. “Ok, cover that up.”

“Can’t you *do* something?” Weeks screams. I get the impression that Weeks was good at something in high school that still makes him feel important today.

“No,” I say, “I can’t.” Lately I have been reading medical texts and case studies from medieval times to the present. I can name all the parts inside Blanks’s neck that I saw through the hole, I can think of the names of procedures that might be used to fix it. It happens that I like stuff on holes in the body, what can be grown or added to cover them. I have practiced certain procedures on oranges. An orange is not enough like a human throat.

“It would take too long for me to do it,” I tell Weeks.

“What the hell do you *read* all that stuff for, then?” Weeks implores stupidly, his hands held out in front of him, palm up, for too long. He stares past them, into the grass.

Blanks looks at me and rolls his eyes about Weeks. You have to be really selfless to empathize with anyone when your head might fall off at any second. Blanks is nice; he grips his throat to keep his head from falling off. *A real stand-up guy*, I think, thinking of some code of manhood. Somewhere, a fictional Hemingway scholar is saying, “You don’t talk about the holes in your throat. You just don’t even mention them.” Blanks has taken certain acts to spare us all the trouble of having his head roll off.

“Weren’t you reading all those doctors’ books or something?”

“Yes, Weeks. But when I got to the sections about gaping holes in the human body, all the texts talked about was your mom.” I am very surprised; I do not really believe that I said it.

For a second, Weeks looks stunned. Blanks starts to laugh and the hole gurgles along until it hurts Blanks so much that he has to stop. I smile at Blanks. *We'll get you through this, Blanks*, I think. *We'll get you some help right a—*

And now there is something like my eye exploding and my glasses fly off my face and I stretch out my hands in front of me—I make my hands into a cradle that my glasses can land in (I, myself, was a wide receiver in high school). I start to put my glasses back on but realize that I am falling. As I fall, I begin to ridicule myself: *Why are you worried about your glasses when your face is splitting open!* Because I love my glasses; I think of materialism, consumerism, Karl Marx, Marx's wife dying in London, some student I tutored back in college: she held court on Marx; she had big teeth. She had devised a very possible path to the perfect socialist state.

Now there are plants crushed under my crotch. My glasses are safe but I think one of my eyes is in the street, and Blanks and Weeks are walking away. *Blanks*, I think.

And then I remember that when I was nine years old, a girl in my neighborhood had a birthday party. My parents had gotten me a gift to give her though I had told them I didn't want to go. My father had said that I didn't have to stay, but that I had to deliver her present and wish her a happy birthday. When I got to her house, all the kids stared at me as I walked to the pile of unopened presents and threw mine on top. Mine was the only rectangle. I don't remember if the kids there were eating cake. One of them had so many memorable spaces: the biggest nostrils, a sizable chip in a tooth; he turned his crumby face so I saw into his ear. From his ear came forth all the silence I felt in that room. (Who was he?) It was the silence that must pad the worlds of the deaf, the dying, the time-traveling—

the silence through which Blanks and Weeks now move towards their car. I know I should hear the fat dumbness of Weeks's step, the shifting mush of what's in Blanks's throat.

But I do not.

Just now, with weeds all around me, thinking my eye's been punched out, I see that my father expected me to want to stay at the birthday party once I got there, to be seduced by the camaraderie. Over a decade later, when she had grown very fine breasts and I was trying to sleep with her, I asked the birthday girl how she felt when I did that. She said she didn't remember any of it.

Weeks and Blanks pull past me in their car. Blanks's eyes meet mine. I pull my left arm from beneath me and half roll over. I sort of reach out and wave—I have decided to be more social. “Happy birthday,” I say to Blanks, though the silence cuts it off. I notice my throat working as I speak, sort of feel guilty for having such a good throat.

“Happy birthday,” I say again.

Something About Levie

I saw Levie about once a week, mostly by chance. She was always there when I felt buzzed, which was often very late in the afternoon. She just sort of showed up—with tea for the both of us. Whenever I saw her I would think, *I should smoke my very first cigarette*.

One day in the park, I observed Levie's approach from a distance. Her pants, striped vertically, poofed out from her bottom. I will later call these her train conductor pants. She walked with her feet very close together, each stride quick and short as if something bound her legs at mid-thigh. I wanted to reach out and steady her, place my wide palm in the groove of her spine. I knew the groove well because I had watched it move on many occasions. I wanted to get as much of my hand as I was able to into that groove at once.

Her shirt was worn soft but well-made, like all her shirts, which hitherto I had imagined hung in her closets, the order of them from left to right as closely matching the rainbow as possible: ROYGBIV. Yet the more I saw her, the more I realized that could not be possible, as most of her clothing was black, white, and brown.

I imagined for myself a fine silver cigarette case that clicked nicely when I shut it, and sprung open like a popping corn kernel each time I pressed the clasp opposite its binding. They surprised and delighted me—the pop and the click. The cigarettes within are impeccably rolled by a gentleman (also of my invention) who I hired to do so, making me not want to touch them. And I never have; I do not think that I ever will. I huffed onto the silver case, rubbed it on my pants, then guffawed at the fingerprints that I just left while attempting to wipe others away. A fool's process, to be sure, but one that kept my sense of awe simple, and my nuance sharp. To boot, I thought that Levie would find it amusing.

As she drew near me she opened a lacey parasol and spun it about. What kind of world is

this! As she curtsied, I sort of jumped up, thinking I'd have to catch, accidentally cupping her breast in the effort. To my surprise, Levie laughed as she straighten herself rather gracefully. She pressed her hand to mine, so that I would continue touching her breast as she finished her curtsy.

A funny thing: my free hand searched the puffy excess of her trousers for her buttocks, which, in finding, it squeezed. There was a meaty firmness that might have originated more from my hands—they *are* rather like bear paws—than from her bottom, but nonetheless made me fully aware of the real human who was touching me. She brushed my moustache from my upper lip with a crisp flick of her index finger and thumb, and leaned in. Finally, we kissed.

As the sun set, a chill crept up, but Levie and I danced all over the parasol that she had dropped when I groped her. We cracked it in several places.

Blanks Moves In

Blanks has quit the force, which means he and his blown-out throat are moving in with me. He has a dog and I joke that someone will make a movie out of our life together.

“Adam Sandler stars as me,” I say.

It still hurts Blanks to gurgles a laugh with his throat like that.

“Fuck you,” he rasps.

“I would like you to, yes.”

Gurgle, gurgle.

“You’re dog is just so cute I want to smash its paws with a mallet,” I say with noticeable Sandler in my voice. At this, Blanks slaps his hand onto the top of my shoulder and squeezes. This is Blanks stopping himself from tremendous violence; I do not say anything more about the movie or his dog.

Blanks, in a different context, could have perhaps become an interesting person. He has in common with all sorts of interesting people a history of emotional abuse from his parents—amongst other things—but with Blanks, a few dulling years in the college dorms and five months in the police academy have changed those “issues” into simple affinities for large breasts and salted meats. That seems healthy enough; I do not wish it otherwise.

I did try to trick Blanks into calmness by putting minimalist drawings up in his room and painting the walls a natural, soothing shade of green. During his throat-leave from the police force, which he took in full before he actually quit, I convinced him that he should teach me how to do simple woodworking (something he learned at the technical high school he attended), and the bookshelf/desk combination we built I had put in his room, stained and loaded with a bunch of gateway books—*Notes from Underground*, *The Stranger*, a Graham Greene story collection

which I myself have never read but will claim to have read if confronted. As a trade, I figure, Blanks will teach me about guns. It feels like I have never had a friend before, but I know that is not true—I just cannot remember what having a friend feels like.

As we carry Blanks's suitcases up the stairs, I think of the first time I met Levie, how I felt the future in what we said to each other. When I take a shower tonight, clean the cat box, and eat grapes from the green glass bowl, it will be a new life. Blanks is a stable force: I know what makes him angry (intellectual rigor, sustained clever bantering, the tightness of certain shirts under his armpits), and I know what makes him sleepy (a long dose of pipe tobacco and subtler David Byrnes songs).

Blanks's dullness could transform into a moderately cultured stoicism. I envy him this raw ability, but I also find myself devising how to nurture it. Blanks is acquainted with people; he could quietly, jollily observe them. His charm: to sit in an armchair and take up the lot of its space. His cheeks would shine and enliven the room as he imposed nothing on the conversation. When someone would argue the relative merits of this painter or that musician, he would take opinions as glistening objects, he would close his eyes and imagine himself as the artist, throwing paint from a bucket, or as the musician, hand-humping a Wurlitzer in a forest. He would leave it all behind at the end of the night. People would invite him back, to new places, too, because if he liked something, he would not like it enough to upset the people that did not like it, so that they would believe they could win him over in the future and take pride in having drawn him to their side. "*Blanks* thinks so-and-so is great, don't you, Blanks?" they would say. Blanks would have to do very little to be valued, and that is what he himself would value.

As we reach the stop of the stairs with the last of his suitcases, I realize that I am simply no longer likable.

I show Blanks his new room for the first time.

He gurgles. “You did this?”

“Yes.”

“This is the desk we made together.”

“I stained it.”

“It looks really nice.”

I watch his throat move. It is probably the truest indicator of one’s emotion: the inner workings of the throat.

“Are these your books?”

“I got them for you. Extra copies, or things I thought you might like to read.”

“Oh. Wow.” He picked up the copy of *Catch 22*, first edition. They were all first editions.

“I saw this movie.”

“The movie is nothing like the book.”

““Where are the Snowdens of yesteryear?”” he asks.

““Yossarian jumped,”” I say.

“What?”

“Nothing. Ever see *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*?”

“No, I don’t really like Johnny Depp.”

“He’s not in the book,” I say.

Blanks smiles, a childlike roll to his lips over his teeth. “What’s up with the art?” he says.

“Just some stuff I had.” I think about scratching the floor in front of me with my toe. I refrain; I refrain from putting my hands in my pockets, looking down, or becoming red. “You

can take it down if you don't like it."

"I like it fine," he says. "I don't have much to hang on the walls anyway. I think I have a poster that glows in the dark somewhere . . ."

A lot depends on Blanks, I think to myself, though I am not sure what that means. "Your mother gave you a lot of nice furniture. Your bedroom set is subtle. This nightstand—"

"It's old."

"—is vintage," I correct him, tracing the worn spots in the wood.

"Ok." Even the slightest smile from Blanks has so much to it—so much skin. I like Blanks, his mouth is so big and funny, and now I have no one to tell that to. I used to have my good friend who would laugh—just bend up and back laughing at whatever I said.

"Hey," Blanks says. "I wanted to tell you that I don't expect you to cook for me all the time like you did for all the cops. I mean, I can cook stuff."

"Blanks, I will not have you eating pizza rolls every night for dinner. I like cooking, really." I feel like Blanks will always be grateful for things, will always be full of wonder, and that makes me despise him. What a despicable lot to always be in the debt of another person, to not procure for oneself the simplest things. "I like to keep the place clean, too. You do your own laundry."

"Oh, I will. I can clean, too. I can do ironing."

"Gold ol' Blanks," I say. Who am I becoming most like? My Uncle Marv?

I walk to the bathroom and look in the mirror. I thirst, but do not drink. My glasses never stay all the way up; my head is never what I expect. Every thought that runs through my mind feels animal, but I am without the directional instinct of an animal. I have always wanted to cut a dog's snout clean in half to see if it could still find its way around. I resolve never to do this to

Blanks's dog.

And isn't this love, then, to be able to acknowledge the darkest impulses, to write them out even, to look another in the bags under his eyes—sense the stench of his crevices—and say, I have a meat cleaver here, and your dog, friend, has a snout that I'd like to see if he can do without. I've no connection to the dog, and although I have no connection to the scientific inquiry that I would provide to justify my cleaving of the dog's snout from its face, I feel compelled to cleave. But then to not go through with it. This expression of love that keeps Blanks in my life, renews us both.

I go to my room, thinking I have hit on something poignant, thinking I am making great strides as a human: I can now be moved by the hypothetical suffering of another human, I can give gifts, I wipe my own ass; I write it all down. I walk back to the bathroom and look in the mirror again. "I have hit on something poignant," I say. "My life is worth something."

"This plant," Blanks says. "Did you put this plant in here, too?"

"It's a succulent, so you can forget it, occasionally."

"There is a bud on it, I think," he says. "I'm no gardener, though. It could be a plant cyst."

Inventing Something About Levie

“Tell me something about Levie,” says Blanks. He’s climbed a tree in his old cop pants, which he’s cut off to make shorts.

“Well, I started seeing Levie about once a week, most often by chance. Though she was kind and clean—I mean her skin seemed scrubbed—whenever I saw her I would think, *I should smoke my very first cigarette.*”

“Tell me more about that feeling.”

“To smoke a cigarette—to create an *action* between oneself and another person—that was my compulsion when I observed Levie’s approach from a distance. And supposedly I loved her! There was, in that space between us she had yet to traverse, room for her past to materialize before her; any moment that her lips were not safely locked to mine, a young man (representing her past, naturally) might stroll over to intercept her, his beard more robust than mine, his swag incredible with violent fashion, his pocketbook sleek and fathomless. ‘A scientist, or a doctor!’ I would be prone to exclaim sometime hence while folding into a couch, resenting Levie’s absence. And of course she’d be absent, because what use was I—a minor tragic figure in a world that I had crafted for myself, a world without employment or mailing addresses—compared to that strolling chap’s gleaming scepter of a cock, that was forever wrestling its way out of his skinny pants?”

Blanks does one of those back flips one does when hanging upside down on a tree limb. He lands in a perfect curtsy.

“Look,” Blanks says, “you have to make Levie navigate the space of her past with resolve and loyalty. The point is that she *made it* to you. You can romanticize how she got there if you like, but just get her there.” Blanks, picking his wedgie: “Make her *move*.”

“One day in the park, Levie moved across the grass, picking up her feet so that—”

“What was she wearing?”

“I thought I was making her *move*.”

“Well, you are. You will. But I want to *see* her, too.”

“Would you even have me invent what she was wearing this one day in the park?”

“Yes,” says Blanks. “And do it in that voice you do it in sometimes—the fancy one.”

“Very well. One day in the park, Levie’s pants, striped vertically, poofed out from her bottom. These are the pants that I will later call her ‘train conductor pants.’ I sat on a bench and she walked towards me with her feet very close together, each stride quick and short as if something was binding her legs at mid-thigh. I wanted to reach out from my position afar and steady her, place my wide palm—as much of it as would fit—into the groove of her spine. I knew the groove well because I had watched it contort and adjust to so many occasions.”

“This is good,” Blanks says, though I am not sure if he refers to my description of Levie or the large turkey drumstick he is eating. That he can eat while hanging upside down seems hardly absurd. “What’s her shirt like?”

“Her shirt, I saw, was soft but well-made, like all her shirts, which hitherto I had imagined hung in her closets, the order of them from left to right as closely matching the rainbow as possible: ROY-G-BIV. Yet the more I saw her, the more I realized that could not be possible, as most of her clothing was made up of black, white, and brown. *BWB*, then, I suppose.

“I laugh as Levie approaches, and here is where I have the thought that I should smoke my very first cigarette.”

“But it can’t be to distance her. Change your reason for it.” Imagine Blanks in Lederhosen! With a straw boater stuck to his head! And his throat scarred!

“The cigarette is in honor of my own dull cleverness. I imagined for myself a fine silver cigarette case that clicked nicely when it shut, and sprung open like a popping kernel each time I would press the clasp opposite its binding. They always surprise and delight me—the pop and the click—each in turn. The cigarettes themselves have been impeccably rolled by a gentleman (also of my invention and perhaps not very much unlike you, Blanks: a man with a little hat that clings to his head even when he is upside-down, a man with cracks in his hands who is nimble even in his stretched shorts, who feigns observance) who I had hired to do just that; I felt as though I should not touch them. And still I never have touched them to this day, and I do not think that I ever will touch them, and certainly I will never smoke them, for how could I: they are so perfect; they are fake. Besides, I am always breathing on the silver case, rubbing it on my pants, then guffawing at the fingerprints that I just left while attempting to wipe others away. A fool’s process, to be sure, but one that keeps my sense of awe simple, and my nuance sharp. To boot, Levie found it amusing. But alas, that was not the day on which I was to smoke my first cigarette.”

I stop here, satisfied, and begin to think of the sound that ice cream makes on my tongue.

“But Levie,” says Blanks, upside-down again from a new buckling tree limb. How nice to see his neck more clearly as his face droops the opposite direction as normal.

“Aha. Levie, yes. As she finally drew near me she opened a lacey parasol and spun it about.”

“What kind of world is this?!”

“As she curtsied, I sort of jumped up, thinking I would have to catch her. Then there I was, accidentally cupping her breast in the effort. To my surprise, Levie laughed as she straightened herself effortlessly—and rather gracefully—of her own will. She pressed her hand

to mine, so that I could continue touching her breast in confidence as she finished her strange bowing gesture. It was a funny thing: my free hand searched the puffy excess of her trousers for her buttocks, which it found and squeezed. There was a meaty firmness that might have originated more from my hands—”

“They *are* rather like bear paws.”

“—than her bottom, but nonetheless made me fully aware of the real human touching me. She then brushed my moustache from my upper lip with a crisp flick of her index finger and thumb, and leaned in. Finally, we kissed.

“As the sun set, a chill rose up, but Levie and I danced all over the parasol that she dropped when I had groped her. We cracked it in several places.”

“Oh, bravo!” Blanks, out of the tree again, has just clapped me on the back.

“Do you want nachos, Blanks?”

“With beef? Beefy nachos?”

“As you wish.”

“No, wait: I meant what happened to Levie’s past? Did you stop imagining it? I have to ask.”

“No. She always carried it around with her. Wherever we would go, there would be her past, a grimace on her lips—the faces she made! I thought we’d cracked it that day in the park; I thought the parasol was her past and we’d cracked it, stomped it, and left it. But that was just a parasol.”

“But that was just a story you made up for me, right now.”

Who is Blanks anyway? “Yes, it was. It was.”

Now here comes the handsomest ice cream man; now I watch him as he goes, tinkles

dragging behind his truck like someone's just been married. One day I will kill the ice cream man and dance on his truck in enormous shoes that will crush it, too.

And then we will see who invents, Ice Cream Man. And then we will see who forgets and loves on.

Levie Calls

As the time drew near for Levie to call, I grew more nervous. With the prospect of disappointment further from me, I'd been more productive. Now, as I felt my coffee settle, I felt inclined to designate it as a premonition—Levie would not call when she was done with work as we planned—rather than a moist pile bespeaking my gastronomical past.

“You must trust my affection for you—that it is there,” she said when she called. “I’m not some leaf that can be blown away by some other man’s pheromonal breeze. I can’t be stolen.” I mustn’t read into her absences from other scheduled calls, her lusts for the attentions other than mine, which she divulges to me freely, as if they mean nothing: the attentions of clever, half-corpulent men in sweater vests, making Power Points; or of coffee dribblers, the vast pathos of their crustless sandwiches prepared by their wives, or of the people that issue night parking passes, or daytime parking passes—

“They want permission to park in your ass,” I said.

“I trust your affection. Truly I do. But those horrible doubts and scenes of carnage that normally flit through one’s mind, *I* must entertain those more fully as a writer. I must allow myself to suspect everyone of every motivation I can imagine, follow every detail to its worst origin, or extrapolate it to its worst end. I have to sit in the possibility that your exasperation for me runs deep; I must try to imagine that exasperation so vividly that there is a ‘language of Levie’s exasperation’ for Burgess, bullet-pointed on my legal pad.”

I touched my penis, straight up poked at it through my pants in public, felt the ramifications of its thinness. I picked my nose and felt a similar triviality run through all of my parts.

“The challenge is to be a writer when you write, and *not* when you’re with me,” Levie

said. She and her hangnails are at a stalemate again—she just stares at them. The fingertips I have kissed trite.

“People want to read more about the cops, I suppose.”

“If they want to read anything at all.”

“Yes, I suppose.”

Well, what did anyone have to say? What did old Wallace say for years that kept her put? Ok, that’s no way to phrase it—she can’t be stolen or swept away. She’s told me so; that is how I know.

The First End of Levie

“I feel mostly happy,” Levie said in my bed. “I don’t think of a future, really. I open my closet and remember these pants and feel giddy. I continue to feel giddy as long as I wear them, until I take them off.”

“What happens then?” I was taking notes.

“Are you writing this down?”

“No.”

“Then—I don’t know. If it’s now, I walk around in my underwear.”

She fetters around in her underwear.

Her shirt was still sturdy around her, a bindle full in a picnic pattern, but her bra was off—normally she didn’t wear one. Her hair was up. I remember thinking, *I am lucky Levie lives alone*. *Shit*, I remember thinking, *I am lucky, period*. If love is skin, it’s sticky and thick, and now I say these things about love not caring what love is. With Levie, I moved toward being able to say those things to her, without fear of judgment.

The first time Levie pressed her sticky arm to mine by the window in bed I pulled it away from her—it was just that I was very sick and I was afraid she would catch it. But the second time I pulled away from her like that, I knew I didn’t love her anymore. I had run out of ways to say that I loved her, at least. The cotton, the skin, what else was there to make a metaphor of? What sucks is since then, I’ve thought of a lot more ways to describe love, specifically the love I think I felt for Levie. I think that means I could love her again now. I think that’s why I’m always looking for her. If I can say something to myself, convincingly, I can feel it. It’s easy for me to stop loving someone if I get lazy enough.

*

I paced in my apartment with my hands behind my back, like some philosopher, and I had forgotten why. For dramatic effect, I had rolled up my pants and taken off my socks and shoes. There was no pocketwatch in my hand and somehow this detail—the lack of pocketwatch in my hand—is the most telling one as I remember it now. I must not have been angry or upset. Maybe I was feeling regretful about something, or was lost in mournful reminiscing. It's making me nostalgic.

Then I heard someone on my stairs. I thought maybe it was cops coming all and so I almost began to step towards the door to scare them as usual, but then I could tell that the unsteady, pillowy steps are Levie's, and then I knew that my pacing had been the pacing of a very vulnerable dread.

The Levie that opened the door was not the Levie that I was familiar with. It's clear by now that I was always forgetting things, failing to grasp familiarities, misplacing the origins of things and misappropriating their contexts. But this was not my normal flaking out: there was a difference in her shoulders, her face. The corners of her mouth pressed into her face in a different way, much more deeply than ever before—it looked like it hurt. Perhaps, it is only in retrospect that my pacing seems dreadful; perhaps it was really looking forward, in remorse; maybe because I knew that Levie was already gone.

What happened with Levie was that her father died and then she disappeared. I went through a list of possible emotional responses:

“How could you leave me when you need me most?” I might have asked, like I am more caring than anyone else she could ever hope to meet.

Or I might have called her selfish. “You're only able to love me when everything else is perfect in your life, when you can ignore me. When you can treat me like a pair of pants that

make you giddy.”

I might have even just said, “Have a nice life,” and lain down on my bed, refusing to look at her.

I stood considering these things as she walked back down the stairs. She had said, “My father died and I don’t think I can love anyone right now.” It’s always hardest if you think it’s not your fault. Or maybe it’s harder when you think it’s no one’s fault. I tried to believe awful things about Levie, but I couldn’t. In all the books I have read, I couldn’t think of a character I ever despised enough to provide a basis of hatred, an archetype to compare Levie to. Even if I could have, Levie is no longer anything like any of them.

I don’t even remember her face; it is a pillowcase, now. I smooth it at night.

Don't Run, Never Forget

You can do all these things in Google Docs: view a PDF; view documents of obscure formats that a friend with no computer savvy has sent you in an attachment to an email that you can't open with any other program; live alone and lonely and still feel important and connected to the world (via "shared" Google Docs—people can edit and view and share); never have to carry heavy notebooks or documents, providing you can get on the internet (and when, honestly, could you *not* get on the internet?); take notes on anything you want to forget now but remember later, knowing they will be there wherever you go forever, whenever you want them to come back into your life. With Google Docs, you would never forget anyone's name or face, you would never lose a friend because you forgot their birthday, or because you forgot that they hated matinees; simply create a file for them and check in on it before you converse with them. You will never lose them; you will never be compelled to run away in shame.

While living with Blanks, I would come home and he would be cooking or typing something into Google Docs. They were docs about books, of course, as Blanks had set about reading theory. He would say something like, "Google Docs is a portal to a place where you are always getting massages. I feel alert yet feathery when I'm Google Doc-ing." Sometimes he would read to me from his docs while I was cleaning the kitchen, or sometimes he would have me read his entries from the day back to him as she diced vegetables into a bowl.

"I'm reading only art theory now. Anti-provincialism. Debunking relativism. Is this making any sense? Read it back to me. I'm hungry." Or they were portions of his novel or his own critical works, but he never had me read those out loud—he only let me see those when he didn't know I was looking at them.

One day, the heat became thick, a wall of grunting bugs. There was actually a wall of grunting bugs outside our kitchen window. We could feel things dripping off our arms that seemed beyond the nature of sweat, a strange alien blood that clung to us as Earth moved closer to the sun, became a different planet. I walked into the kitchen and sang to Blanks, “Can’t run from these colors with a boot up your ass! Never forget! You are my nine-eleven!”

“It is so hot,” he said. He did not move as he sat in a kitchen chair. I could see that he was stuck to it, the paint melted to his flesh, probably. “And *humid*.”

“Behold, dry leaves are rehydrated. Jesus is here in the wounds of the humid.” I opened the fridge; even inside of it things drooped. “What are you doing?” I asked Blanks.

“I am thinking about horses. It is too hot to do anything else.”

In his novel I knew there were horses, and I thought that was a powerful start. Animals were dying on nearly every page, the bleakness of the corpses tempered by a relatable story of lost love and the inexplicable presence of tea.

“I read a poem wherein horses ran so far and hard that they forgot they were horses,” I said. The heat felt a little like swimming. “But horses don’t know they’re horses to begin with, do they?”

“Have you ever looked deeply into a horse’s face and told it, ‘You are not a horse’?” he asked. He stared at me until I laughed and then we laughed together, my tiny hands curved, loose, and bouncing in front of my chest.

“Profound,” I said. We had not yet grown weary of the lack of sex we had had recently; we used our randiness to describe the phenomena of literature, its constantly unfolding natures. The very stuff of boner killing.

“I don’t feel like the horses in your novel are symbolic. I feel like they are just horses.

Their deaths do not usher in the apocalypse.” I ate some wilting celery; a vein stuck to my upper lip. I felt beautiful. My hair, had I had any, would have been sticking to my forehead—I felt cleansed by the want for clean things: skin and hair. “I feel like you treat horses on their own terms, with certain nervousness.”

I picked up his laptop and placed it on my lap. He had one finger in a mug of ice water. It was all he could manage.

The wet sun seemed very close.

“Hot,” he said.

“What is ‘humanism’?” I asked. I searched his Google Docs. “Who wrote *Existentialism is a Humanism*?”

“My guess is Sartre.” He had not read it, or at least I could not see that she had read it by examining her Google Docs. Plus, the internet was running slow—swollen, perhaps.

“My guess is Hubbard, comma, space, L. Ron,” I said.

Blanks laughed. “I want to make a shirt that says, ‘I Heart Sartre’ with heart spelled H-A-R-T-R-E.”

“What about ‘I Hartre Sartre’s Fartres’?”

Often I wanted to hug him at least, but never knew how. I searched his Google Docs in hopes of finding very detailed hugging diagrams, catered to his shape and mine, explaining every bend.

I can’t remember what happened next. I close my eyes and try to feel where memories exist in my brain. I’m going to use minute tongs to yank what-happens-next out of my brain, slap it under a microscope and if I don’t like what I see, I’m going to get rid of it for good. Yes: rub all of it on my balls, throw all of it away.

Perhaps I said these things to Blanks, wanting to dissect my brain to see which memories were real, which were fabricated, which were literature. It's quite possible I told him this—I would tell him everything I ever thought, even about my balls. I never knew what to think or say, but with Blanks I always knew what to think and talk *about*.

In a soaking undershirt, I remember now, I left the apartment with celery strings dangling: wispy moustachios. I walked whipped by the fuzzy sun. My knees hurt; and then I forgot them. And then I forgot about Blanks, left him to Google Docs. I walked to the desert of the night, where my shirt dried to me.

I went to the woods.

I left Blanks the next day without saying good-bye. I took only what I could carry in or attach to an old duffle bag. I made the mistake of taking some eggs, all of which broke before I ever reached the woods. For a week I tried to sleep in the woods and hunt for my food; or I tried to scrape yoke crust from the Velcro, carving off bits with my incisors. Somewhere along the line I had learned to throw an ax with accuracy, and to tie my shoes in complete silence. I couldn't be completely silent while doing anything else, even while doing nothing, so I would tie my shoes and wait for a rabbit to hop near, or a squirrel, or a snake. Then I threw my ax at it. The only thing I ever hit was a snake, and it tasted good when I cooked it in a pan I'd kept tied to my duffle. *It tasted fine*, I wrote in my notebook. I wrote in pencil and cooked over a fire but the only thing I ever cooked beside the snake was coffee. I took solace in the fact that I had finally lost some weight; *I had been meaning to lose it*. Glamour: *a documentary starring me one night in a club with Italian shoes looking dehydrated, translucent, and oversexed, probably trying to be a vampire*. I thought long strings of things to myself, figuring that I could make sense of them later. Even in the woods I kept so many, and at night I would cover myself in them. My pillow was months overdue at the university library.

I left the woods because they bored me, because I did not know enough about them. What I really wanted was to become a man of silence, one who knew not to interrupt a conversation he knew nothing about; such a man must know how to fish, smoke cigars, leave sufficient gratuity.

I was not very fit and when I woke my joints moved only with greater effort and less range. So I told myself I had to start walking with my whole body: by doing that I would loosen up my blood chunks (I could feel them move through me, get stuck in the cold dampness) and

my bowels, my. At night I would walk where no one would see me and wave all my limbs around while doing so. When I stepped with my right leg, my whole leg went up in a wave-like motion and carried forward, cresting outward and onward, about the length of my height. The blood in the right half of my body swam skyward, rolled over itself, while the blood in my left side sloshed in potential. Then the left side became the wave, moving forward in the same way as the right had, while the right side stirred in waiting. The sides of my body rotated around my spine, an axis between them.

I limbered up, stretched out over time so that finally I could take strides longer than my whole height, and also, in this way, for months I only thought of what my nerve endings brought to my brain. On soft grass at the edge of the forest I would remove my shoes and step, spreading my toes. I was not satisfied if each loping step I made did not end with a blade of grass in each of the spaces between my toes. If I would make enough missteps and become frustrated, that would be it, I would stop the whole process. I could always see the end of that simple frustration. When I had to stop I would stand with my arms stretched upward to the sky and hold them there, sometimes for an hour or more. I would feel the blood move down through them, then swing my arms down quickly, the extremities catching up to the blood. Then I would begin walking again, the sides of my body moving as mirroring tides, past frustrations forgotten.

When I left the woods, I stopped drinking alcohol or anything that would thin my blood or compromise my heart. I ate no eggs, and whereas previously in my life I had enjoyed abundant vinegar on salads, I began thinking then that such things were to be avoided altogether. It felt good to drink fresh juice, and many a mid-afternoon I would awake for the day (if I had I been sleeping at all) and would walk to a small grocer. I would have them juice every variety of

vegetable they had on hand. Often, it did not taste very good, but by taking the most obvious pleasure out of sustenance, I began to develop my palate. I would concentrate on identifying each ingredient, attempt to isolate it from all other flavors.

Of course, I could not do it right away, except for with very strong flavors like ginger or beet. Each day, I had to satisfy myself with very little progress, if any. It didn't hasten my gastronomical development that I did not bother to master one combination of flavors before I moved on to the next (I always asked the person preparing the juice to keep the mixes secretive and rotating) but it did help me to cultivate calmness in the face of frustration and the general slowness of my life. In the end, the juice was a reward in itself: I consciously acknowledged the nutrients it provided, and sometimes it tasted good, too.

I was never sick during those days. I felt quite virile.

Then the winter came and turned the dewy park grass into a frozen mat. Still, I walked barefoot over the frosted turf and sometimes through inches of snow. The challenge, I told myself, was to not feel the coldness, or to feel it but then to isolate the place in my brain that processed it, to recognize the physical experience as a distinct neural phenomenon within my body. I would not allow myself to say, "This *is* cold," for example. No thing *is*, or even *was*, but rather only relates to other objects and forces around it, changing as its relations change. So, instead I would say, "I experience a particular nervous reaction; my feet interact—electrically—with this swath of earth covered with a dusting of partially frozen water; my brain categorizes these sensations with other similar ones and also begins to apply a rubric (where or when did I learn it?), producing both 'intellectual' and 'physiological' responses." I aimed for accuracy in my perceptions and

descriptions of the world; to be accurate one must certainly be outside oneself.

The thought behind this all was to make myself a better person. What could remain beyond my achievement if I could choose exactly what to feel or not to feel at any time? Surely, we have all recognized at some point that what we *should* be feeling and what we are *actually* feeling at that time do not align. We *should* commiserate with a friend's misfortune when we secretly feel that she deserved it; we *should* rejoice in her success when really we are jealous. But if we could learn to trace the pulses in our brains, we could know, for example, when some memory, word association, or overriding mood that *can be controlled* and disassociated with the present stimulus is preventing us from sympathizing properly with our friend. Or, if we could just resituate our experience with this friend in our brain, create for it a category that will never be reused, we could respond genuinely.

I began to believe that one could be perfect, by which I mean that one could, in all instances, avoid hurting another person. And so I continued with my exercises in the frozen park at the edge of the woods until one evening I entered the organic grocery feeling very warm and generous. I went to order a juice but, alas, my head was too heavy and I fell over onto the counter. Something red spread through my vision, which I assumed at the time was the beet juice I'd wanted to order, waiting for me.

When I awoke I was on a cozy couch in front of a fireplace. Socks and slippers covered my feet and a fleece blanket, which I seemed to remember from my youth, was tucked over and behind my shoulders. I was still cold—I felt as though there were a layer of dampness between my skin and muscle—but I immediately sought to locate the source of that realized “coldness” in my brain and eradicate it. I began to lightly scratch my head to stimulate blood flow, perhaps a

technique I learned from one of my medical texts. Probably hallucinating, I located the spot in my brain that seemed to pulse *cold cold cold coldness, throughout the body: coldness* and tried to hold onto it while I thought of warm things: Levie's hand on my neck at a street corner, a microwave on low power, fresh tar. To no avail.

"A bit of scotch!" I called, not knowing to whom.

From around a corner came one of the clerks from the organic grocery. I think I must be making this up now, but I might as well tell it to see what happens. The clerk was single, I knew, or at any rate I am deciding now as I retell this that she is single, because it makes me feel hopeful, even in retrospect.

"How are you feeling?" she asked. Very simple and believable if I do say so myself.

I pouted, "A bit of scotch."

I realized that I probably did not have any scotch in my apartment—I'm no Proust! But then I realized that I was not in my apartment—I did not have a fireplace or fleece blanket or slippers—so maybe there was some scotch.

"Is there any scotch?" I asked, hopefully pulling the blanket to my ears so that my face was half framed in fleece. I recognized a simpering feeling that I thought would be nice to affect more often in the future presence of this woman. She dabbed at my sweaty brow with her fingertips, then sniffed them. I imagined little divots left in my forehead—would she watch them while they filled up with my spongy skin?

She smiled as though not at me, turned, and walked back around the corner. I saw her totter and wanted to brace her but my elbows ached when I tried to stretch my arms toward her. Then her tottering fell away like dry skin or a thin shell and she appeared before me in the full light of the fire, with a mug of tea. Of course: it was Levie. She wore a black dress that peaked

between her thighs and dark green tights. A braid of orangish hair—of which I could discern neither the origin nor the end—wrapped around the crown of her head and kept the rest of her hair from falling onto her face. Her shoes reminded me of pilgrims dancing safely above the snow, corn stored nearby. *New England*, I thought, and rubbed my head. I didn't know how I'd gotten there, but I was sure I was in Vermont.

She pressed the side of her palm to my brow. She always seemed to be smiling so that she could not possibly look aloof or uncaring, even wrapped in such fashionables as she was. I felt then, very specifically, that I needed her constant sympathy, and when she placed the mug at my lips and propped up my head for my first sip of tea, I thought, *Just what I needed*.

My forehead must have cooled enough, for she then produced a golden flask of scotch and splashed some into the tea.

“Just a bit,” she winked. What is an angel, anyway? All mythical things stem from wishes cast in reality.

When she once again moved away from me toward what I assumed was the kitchen, I saw the back of her dress, which draped down nearly to her buttocks. From her right shoulder a strap drooped to the other side of the dress and connected under her shoulder blade. The strap seemed to serve no purpose. Her back, however, was not bare: she wore a sports bra of some sort, the sight of which shifted my blood into my penis.

Levie was to attend a holiday party that night—hence the dress—but she said I could stay until I felt better. She had increased my portion of scotch considerably and since I had not taken any alcohol in many months and had not eaten anything that day, I felt quite drunk by the time Levie left, and began to feel sick.

I woke up wet on the bathroom floor, my line of sight directed into a corner behind the

toilet. A gentle, homey dust covered the baseboards and conjured in me a feeling that I must have once had a grandmother, though I could only vaguely envision Estelle Getty in the toiletries aisle of a Walgreens. *Remember this*, I thought to myself. I pressed my finger to the dust and then licked it.

I staggered from the house. In a park a block from her apartment I fell faint again and collapsed. It was then, after nearly a year's absence from him, that Blanks found me.

"Your ankles," was all he said, squeezing one of my bare feet in his hands, his fingers like the heads of madmen. I thought he was crying because he could no longer tell the difference between feet and ankles. In my dreams there was flesh that flowed down over human bodies and covered ankles, piled over them onto the ground, formed puddles and spread out. I wanted to be warm skin stretched over the eyes of everyone I had ever known: what a joy it would be to buffer the harsh thinning light of age and the daily.

Blanks got me home—back to the place that we'd shared that he'd kept up in my absence. My room was just how I'd left it. Blanks spent the better part of the morning in my doorway, smoking his pipe as ever, talking until I could feel the texture of the sheets around me, until I had the range of motion to pull the blankets into the crevices of my joints, and fall asleep.

On the Use of a Loved One's Hands

I would sit in cafés for hours at a time, drawing shapes with my pencil, for example. At that time it felt right to obsess over something, so I decided to fill my notebook with shapes drawn in pencil. Then I thought to trace over all the pencil with a pen. This, I realized suddenly, was getting to the true essence of obsession: why one did a thing didn't matter, only that one was *doing* it. I could have nearly started sweating. I asked the barista for a pen, then I asked her for a black pen because she had given me a blue pen.

"You can't be obsessive using a blue pen," I said to her. I threw up my hands in the shape of something that felt like a gang sign. I was not in a gang—there were no gangs in this city—but I was feeling very into shapes. Shapes are hard to make with your hands; they can even ruin your hands if you try to make them too often over the course of many years, obsessively. Then I said, "Arthritis," and sat down.

I continued to sit in the café for a very long time and retraced all the pencil markings with the black pen until the pen's ink ran out. I felt certain that in order to truly obsess, to be a serious, compelling person with hot blood and potent erections, I would have to actually sweat until I found another black pen to finish covering all the pencil lines. It would even have to be the same kind of black pen. I tried very hard but I could not make myself sweat. I pressed my back to the chair and sat up very straight and moved my eyes very rapidly in their sockets, searching the room for a the same kind of black pen that I had been using. I thought that at least my eyelids would sweat a little. I kept my quadriceps taut. It was so silly. I was obsessing over obsessing properly! Feeling satisfied with having achieved at least some kind of obsession, I got up and threw the pen away. I placed some coins on the counter to cover the cost of pen. I blinked out something in Morse code to the barista—a gang slogan or something insane—and sat back

down, reeling in the real palpable stuff of obsession!

Such were the steps I was taking daily in cafés to become an eccentric.

I must have been there eight hours one day when Levie's past walked in with a bearded man in very sexual slacks. Levie seemed more buoyant than ever. She wore a gray T-shirt with small holes in it: the shirt was worn so soft. The holes seemed almost deliberate, and I mention them here all the more deliberately, because I feel they represent something, though I am not sure what. Having never worked a day in my life, I had fingers that tapered into soft pads at the tips and I began to imagine them pressing into the holes in Levie's shirt.

I slouched down my socks as far as they would go. The barista had winked and given me another pen and I had begun to draw on the circular, boney parts of my ankles. *How tribal!* I thought. The bones came to a sharp apex and in my mind they, too, could settle in the holes of Levie's shirt. Her shirts had enough holes to cradle all the points on my body.

I continued to sit in a modest corner of the café where Levie would not see me looking at her and her bearded man. Inside one of the covers of my notebook I wrote, *Mine was a private eccentricity*. This, of course, was the beginning of yet another novel. I fancied myself tainted with a sort of primal lunacy, and knew that I could only present myself to Levie if I could do so with the proper decorum of a gentleman. The long collar of my sweater I pulled up over the bridge of my nose, hiding. Or it felt good. I simply liked it, I tell you.

Levie and the bearded man sat on the very air of the place and existed solely to make each other laugh. My drink was much too sweet and perhaps in the context of certain books or films I might have accused the barista very loudly of having added unwanted marzipan syrup to my drink, the ruckus causing Levie to take note of me. Then, for the sake of the plot and the admiration of the audience, I would have to overcome great adversity to regain Levie's affection.

In the end, I would present a thoughtful gift to the barista to make things right between us, too: a portion of lottery winnings or a plane ticket to Paris. Instead, I rolled my moustache hairs between my fingers, balling up the sugary crust that accumulated there from my drink, and pulled the balls loose, flicking them into the unknown.

I wanted to wash my moustache and considered walking into the rain, which had started to fall so thickly that one might slip on a single, partially decayed leaf on the pavement. Just then, Levie and the bearded man rose to exit; naturally, I followed. Laughing as ever, they stepped into the rain. Outside the café, we started to walk in opposite directions, and when I turned to look at them, they did not seem aware that anyone was watching. They walked heavily together. My eyes were very good at the time, so I could see the drops that landed in the holes of Levie's shirt. They splashed. What did the water feel, I wondered.

Then, the bearded man reached his arm over Levie's head, his wrist parabolically bent into a very pathetic umbrella. They both laughed so hard. Then they laughed more because Levie reach up, spread the bearded man's fingers apart, and acted dry by crossing her arms and nodding in satisfaction.

All this I told to Blanks in great detail. He liked to listen to things about everyday life, and this feeling of distance I had sticking all over me—well that was as everyday as it got, I figured.

The sun came through the kitchen window now. I felt fat; the evening was shot.

"That's the sort of thing you build a whole life around," Blanks said. His hands fell to the sides of his easy chair in a way such that I knew it was nighttime. All I could manage, meanwhile, was to note that trying to use an arm as an umbrella and having someone laugh at the ridiculousness of it with you—that was what you built a life around. You built a life around

using things in ways that they were not meant to be used. Or, you built a life around accepting the failures of those you thought you loved, sometimes even acting as though those failures were successes.

I kept staring at Blanks's hands. "If you live to be ninety do you think you will go bald?" I asked.

"If I do, if I am, you can knit me a hat."

Bebop Group

For flavor I have joined a bebop group that scats (not poops) on the steps of the town's courthouse. Blanks said I needed to get out more but I don't think this is what he had in mind.

My main job with the bepoppers is the hair goop. I get it cheap in boxes of two dozen tins each. One of our songs is "That's How We Like It," regarding the goop. When we sing it I juggle the tins, catching the last one in my teeth during the final note.

One day some hipster shows up and asks us to sign to a record label. I consider signing, if only because it could be the clear decisive action that this story needs to propel itself forward. (A voice says, *You [can] always go back, but you [can] never go forward*. Well, that was just my mother calling. To thwart me, she has become a literary critic. I have just realized that for years what I have been wishing for my mother is more a damnation than anything. For her, I have been wishing a life more like my own: absent-minded, living in daily danger of contracting syphilis, wandering the globe on mysterious (and, in fact, unveritable) finances.)

But that's it: I will not take that decisive action, there will be no spice to my life, I will learn no lesson. But I *will* tell you what happens at the end, and I will tell you now, in case you don't keep reading. At the end, I will be sitting alone at my desk. On the desk is an oil lamp, lit, and a laptop, on the screen of which glows a lone word document; behind it, the "desktop" displays a distorted image of Jack Spicer. As if subjected to the whim of a cinematographer, you zoom in over my left shoulder. (I always sit slightly towards the right side of any object in front of me.) One phrase appears on the page—it acts as a title, which you realize, for the first time, never appeared after the acknowledgements page or on the cover of this document. It reads, MAYBE SOMETHING HAPPENED.

Then, when you zoom back out, I will be dead, from a gas leak that had been neglected

after my landlord's death. Indeed, I am presently getting very sleepy, and have had a bloody nose and constant headache for some days already—I'd better hurry on, here.

At my funeral, three people are there. Blanks, Levie, and maybe Younger Bewford. Or if I had it my way, it would be just Blanks, Levie, and a neckless, musky mystery man, hunched under a raincoat—someone who just wanted a sandwich or a reason to feel sad. (Once, Levie called me a “sad sandwich.” How I loved her for that!) Blanks would ask my corpse, “Why are you moving on again?” and then he would ask the man, “Who are you?” and the man would say, “I'm his dad,” and that would be the end.

Blanks is off in the city. He has no money but he forges a place for himself in the minds of the people there, in the holes in the buildings of Bushwick. Even on Fenimore Street, in the slop of garbage day south of the park, he leaves his mark: a napkin, once holding a knish, once held in his hand—this story in remembrance of everything he's touched.